

# Our Opinion: How to rig elections

Ⓞ 11.11.16

Democratic congressional candidates Pete Glidewell and Bruce Davis earned 57 percent of the vote in Guilford County — but Guilford County will be represented by Republicans Mark Walker and Ted Budd anyway.

That is exactly according to plan. The state legislature, controlled by Republicans, engineered congressional, legislative and in some cases even county districts to favor GOP candidates. The strategy worked brilliantly.

Guilford County illustrates the effectiveness of this gerrymandering. It's strongly Democratic but is split between two Republican-leaning congressional districts, the 6th and 13th. It is also governed by a majority-Republican Board of County Commissioners, thanks to gerrymandered county districts. Five out of nine of its state legislators are Republicans. It seems as if voters' preferences don't matter.

Gerrymandering is the technique of grouping together certain kinds of voters through the manipulation of district lines. To give Republicans advantages, some districts are packed with large majorities of Democratic voters, while a greater number of districts are created with slimmer majorities of Republican voters. It enables Republicans to elect more candidates per vote.

North Carolina's congressional map illustrates the overall effect. In 13 races, Republican congressional candidates drew 53 percent of the total vote but won 10 seats. Winning 10 out of 13 — 78 percent of the seats — with 53 percent of the vote is quite a trick, but that's the sort of result gerrymandering is designed to achieve. Put another way, Republicans elected one congressman with every 242,322 votes. It took Democrats 706,096 votes to elect each of their congressmen.

This does more than stack the deck against one party. It eliminates competition. Somewhere in this country, voters might decide closely fought congressional contests — but not in North Carolina. Not one winner in a North Carolina congressional election Tuesday received less than 56 percent of the vote. The three Democratic winners — G.K. Butterfield, David Price and Alma Adams — achieved landslides of 69 percent, 68 percent and 67 percent, respectively. They have lots of spare voters who could provide balance to adjoining districts.

Much was said during this year's campaign about "rigged" elections. Gerrymandering is one way of rigging elections because it determines outcomes before votes are cast.

It's ironic that this happens in North Carolina, which in statewide elections is perhaps the most competitive state in the country. It should have more competitive congressional and legislative races, too.

Competition is good for democracy, which is stronger when candidates engage in real debates about the issues. In the 13th congressional district, which covers about half of Guilford County, Republican Budd refused to debate Democrat Davis, even though Budd had never run for public office before and, living

in Davie County, was little known to voters here. But he knew he didn't have to debate because any Republican was bound to win in the gerrymandered district.

At least voters did have a choice. Not so in many of Guilford County's rigged legislative and county districts. When the next nine-member board of commissioners takes office next month, five of its members — a majority — will have been elected without opposition. Part of the blame will belong to parties that failed to put up a candidate in some districts, but it's hard to find someone to run an uphill race.

Many legislators of both parties think it's time to create a nonpartisan process for drawing fair, competitive districts. This week's returns offer more evidence of why that would be the right thing to do.



Andrew Krech/N&R

**Voters line up at Brown Recreation Center in Greensboro Tuesday.**